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AUTHOR Sackney, L. E.; Wilson, K. A.
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ABSTRACT

Although effective schools research has indicated the need for an added emphasis on increasing student achievement within a satisfying learning climate, the issue of how best to implement this research has been perplexing for both researchers and practitioners. Different approaches are being tried in two rural Saskatchewan school divisions. In Division A (six schools), the project consisted of three main activities: reviewing a set of nine school effectiveness variables; having each school staff use a rating procedure to choose which of the nine factors might be the best starting point for an improvement effort; and explaining a "plan of action" process whereby specific targets, procedures, and responsibilities were developed for whole staff approval before implementation. Reaction to the project was varied, but generally the improvements attempted were satisfactory to the staff. The degree of commitment and leadership were reflected in the success rate. In Division B (15 schools), the basic intention is the improvement of principalship, judged important because of the centrality of the principal's role in building and sustaining the organizational culture of the school. School improvement will then come about through cultural linkages. It is expected that the cultural development approach will yield more successful results, but the results are not yet known. (JMM)

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ALTERNATIVE RURAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT MODELS:

DEVELOPMENTAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Dr. L. E. Sackney

Dr. K. A. Wilson

Department of Educational Administration
University of Saskatchewan

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Introduction

The last number of years has witnessed an added emphasis on increasing student achievement within a satisfying learning climate. In large part this enthusiasm has emanated from the effective schools research. Unfortunately, the issue of how best to implement this research has been perplexing for both researchers and practitioners.

In many instances there is strong support for improvement efforts at the district level, but some scepticism on the part of teachers and principals. This scepticism stems from a number of reasons. Firstly, many teachers and principals perceive these approaches as "another educational bandwagon" that will vanish over the horizon after a few years. Secondly, many teachers and principals perceive most implementation models require too much effort on their part. In many cases school boards have been reluctant to provide release time for conducting needs assessment and planning activities; therefore many teachers and principals see any initiatives as an "add-on". Thirdly, some educators have yet to be convinced about the efficacy of the school effectiveness research. For example, some find advocated approaches to teaching such as direct instruction antithetical to a child-centered view of education. Fourthly, many teachers and principals are at that stage of their career where they are divesting not investing in new activities. And finally, many principals and teachers perceive these programs and activities as being "top-down", designed to more closely monitor and control the work of those in schools.

The question becomes how best to respond to the school improvement movement. In particular, how does one go about building momentum to change schools so that they become more instructionally effective? Does one allow

for the opting in and opting out option? What is the role of central office?

Although we do not propose to deal with all of the issues raised, we do plan to discuss two implementation approaches with which we had experience in two rural Saskatchewan school divisions. One approach was more "top-down", centrally initiated, the other approach was more "grass roots", or developmental in nature. It is our intention to outline these two approaches to discuss the implications of each, and finally to offer some propositions for those considering projects based on the effective schools research.

The Perceived Need for Change

There is little doubt that the public is concerned about education. Opinion polls (e.g., Morrow, 1984) and our planning studies (e.g. Renihan et al., 1987) conclude that the educational system as a whole is perceived as less than satisfactory. Generally, people complain that the standards are too low, the teaching is inadequate, and the schools are not performing as well as they should be. According to Riffel (1987) this pressure is most acutely felt at the district level. District officials, of course, are keenly interested in changing this perception and view the effective schools research as a panacea.

At the school level, these same opinion polls and planning studies depict a different picture. Generally, parents are more satisfied with their school and teachers. Thus the same pressure for change is not felt as acutely.

Improvement Approaches

The literature on organizational renewal and change seems to be of two opinions. One view is that schools are self-directed and that change is a continuous process. According to this view, those working in the schools should be left to their own devices. As argued by Gordon (1984) and Riffel (1987), this view may be more myth than reality: that, in fact, for many schools, if left to their own devices, change will likely never happen.

The other view is that organizational renewal must come from the top. This view, of course, implies the bureaucratic metaphor. For many, this view is fraught with problems.

A more recent view is a call for a developmental approach to school improvement (Riffel, 1987). Riffel contends that it is necessary to establish clear expectations that schools must improve, but a great deal of autonomy needs to be given to the school in choosing the direction it may wish to pursue. He claims, "the developmental argument is that the empowerment of schools must be seen as a condition for improvement..." (p. 3).

We now turn to a consideration of the two projects conducted within two rural school divisions. In both cases the projects were prompted by a perceived need for change and improvement, however, the initiative for undertaking the projects did not occur in the same way.

The School Improvement Project in Division A

In February, 1984, the Director of Education in Division A sought assistance from the Department in order to introduce a clinical supervision scheme in each of the schools in the Division. In the course of

discussions about such a proposal he became aware of the burgeoning interest in school effectiveness literature and the prospect that this material might be used as the basis for school improvement efforts. Subsequently the clinical supervision idea was dropped in favor of mounting a Division-wide improvement effort based on the school effectiveness literature.

The project was formally introduced in June, 1984 with a full day workshop involving all of the teachers in the Division. However, this day was preceded by a full day workshop with all of the administrators in the Division. The nature of both days could best be characterized as providing educators with information about effective schools and giving some understanding about the recurring factors that seemed to be common among effective schools. The latter were posited as matters that might be focussed on in attempts to improve schooling in the Division. Such an approach had earlier been foreshadowed: "Flaws in the original research should not discredit the notion of discovering effective school characteristics - seeds for school improvement that can be sown elsewhere" (Purkey and Smith, 1982, p. 66).

The Division in 1984 had six schools: one K-6, one K-9, one 7-12 and three K-12. The 1984 school enrolment was 1154 students and the teaching force consisted of 71 people, including the six principals. The Division office staff consisted of the Director, the Secretary-Treasurer and one clerical assistant.

After the initial meeting with the whole staff of the Division, each school staff was asked to reflect on the possibility of becoming involved in a school improvement project beginning in the fall of 1984. A second full day workshop was held in August, just prior to the start of the school

year, at which time school staffs were given an overview of the project plan.

The overview consisted of three main activities: reviewing, in some detail, a set of nine school effectiveness variables; having each school staff choose, by a rating procedure, which of these nine factors might be the best starting point for an improvement effort; explaining a "plan of action" process whereby specific targets, procedures and responsibilities were developed for whole staff approval prior to implementation. For the last two activities each school staff met separately with a group facilitator from the Department.

An undertaking given to all school staffs was that any school staff could choose not to become involved in the project. In other words, the project's implementation did not require the support of every one of the six schools. It turned out that all six staffs chose to become involved.

The Director of Education had the support and encouragement of the School Division Board members in moving ahead on the project. The Board's approval was tangible in two ways: financial and through the provision of five half-days, spread throughout the year, for the school staffs to work on project activities.

Initial Reaction to Project

Reactions among the schools, and within the same staff, varied from negative and sceptical to enthusiastic and positive. Some teachers had the impression that participation in the project was compulsory, that the project was foisted on the group from above, or that the project was another of the long list of innovations that could not be sustained. Several thought that such an improvement scheme was long overdue but

expressed concern as to whether any long term and worthwhile changes would occur. Some were concerned because of the perceived difficulty in implementing a project when half of the teachers on staff were new to the school.

The positive comments included reference to the opportunity for the whole staff to work together, the fact that the project was school-based, the increased level of teachers' contribution to school decisions and the opportunities teachers would have to evaluate their performance in a professional way.

School Improvement Efforts

Because the project was school-based, the choice of an item or area n which to work for improvement varied throughout the Division. Examples of activities for which action plans were developed and implemented included: a revised homework policy for high school grades; development of a school newsletter; a special focus on the language arts program; a changed system for student recognition; a developmental approach to the teaching of basic skills and new approaches to science teaching in the elementary grades.

Teachers reported a fair measure of satisfaction about the improvements attempted, and most satisfaction in schools where the whole staff wholeheartedly supported the attempted improvement. In schools where the first improvement effort proved successful, the school staff was eager to take on another area for attention. Several schools enjoyed little success because of conflict and changing leadership.

Overall Reaction to the Project

A high degree of dissatisfaction was expressed by one school staff.

The major reason cited for this view dealt with the times that the principal made changes in action plans in opposition to the wishes of the staff group. The overall reaction of another group might be characterized as hopeful although there were statements which indicated some impatience with the degree of progress. The general impression of staff members in another school was that the project had not been implemented very successfully. Comments included: "Things we intended to work on were easily dropped because of poor implementation procedures"; "Nothing consistent was ever implemented"; "As a staff we have not carried through on any of our guidelines."

The other schools expressed very positive comments about the project. Comments included reference to the heightened sense of professionalism from working more closely with colleagues; the perceived improvements which were noticeable in students and the associated raised satisfaction levels of teachers; the development of a sense of unity in the staff through a sharing of common goals and purposes; and the development of a sense of commitment to the concepts of improvement and effectiveness.

General Comments

Throughout the project, external resource people were used to facilitate the planning for improvement activities. Principals received minimal assistance from the consultants but were given access to a considerable amount of effectiveness literature. At the conclusion of each activity principals prepared a brief report describing its nature and its perceived effects.

The project is now in the final stages of its third year. In several of the schools the school improvement activities have been sustained and

effective; in others efforts have been sporadic. Differences in the degree of commitment to the project, the leadership efforts of the principals and the thoroughness of planning and implementation were associated with the degree of success of improvement efforts.

School Improvement Project in Division B

The school improvement project in School Division B is completing its first year of operation. School Division B is a small rural system comprising 1,837 pupils, 15 schools and 121 teachers. The smallest school has three teachers and the largest has 21 teachers.

School Division B in the previous five years could be characterized as a system under conflict. Teacher-Board relations were not amicable. The Board, and in particular the Board Chairman, perceived their role as keeping the mill rate down. Thus whenever teachers and administrators made suggestions for improvement these were usually frowned upon, especially if there was a cost factor associated with the suggestions.

As a result of recent elections there has been a change in the composition of the Board, and in their attitude towards the schools. Furthermore, under the tutelage of the Departmental Superintendent of Schools the Board has become much more receptive to improvement efforts. Within this climate the Principals' group decided that it was time to plan more systematically for their own in-service and that of their teachers.

After a period of orientation to the school effectiveness literature, followed by numerous discussions with the Board members and the principals, the Department entered into a contract with the School Division to guide the implementation of an improvement model for all the schools.

The Model

The model is developmental in nature. During the first year of the contract the emphasis was on developing the leadership skills of the principals (see Figure 1). The underlying assumption behind this model was to have the principals the main instigators behind the improvement plans. In part, the reason stemmed from our previous experiences with school improvement. The training program for the principals was conducted in a number of stages.

In stage one, the emphasis was on principal self-awareness. The focus was on the principal examining his/her belief system, values and assumptions, and the culture he/she was attempting to create in the school.

Stage two involved an examination of their leadership. In particular, the focus was on leadership styles, use of power, decision making preferences, time management, conflict resolution, communication styles and networking approaches. Furthermore, a considerable amount of time was spent in examining the research literature on principal effectiveness. Subsequently, every principal was provided with a binder of reading materials covering these concepts. As part of this leadership thrust we also enrolled the principals in the Apex program; they were encouraged to write-up and submit at least one case per month.

The third stage focussed on the School Effectiveness attributes. The principals were made aware of the research on school effectiveness. They were asked to establish a library on school effectiveness within each staff room in an attempt to sensitize the teachers. Furthermore, we provided subscriptions for the principals to such journals as Educational Leadership.

It should also be noted that principals were encouraged to keep their

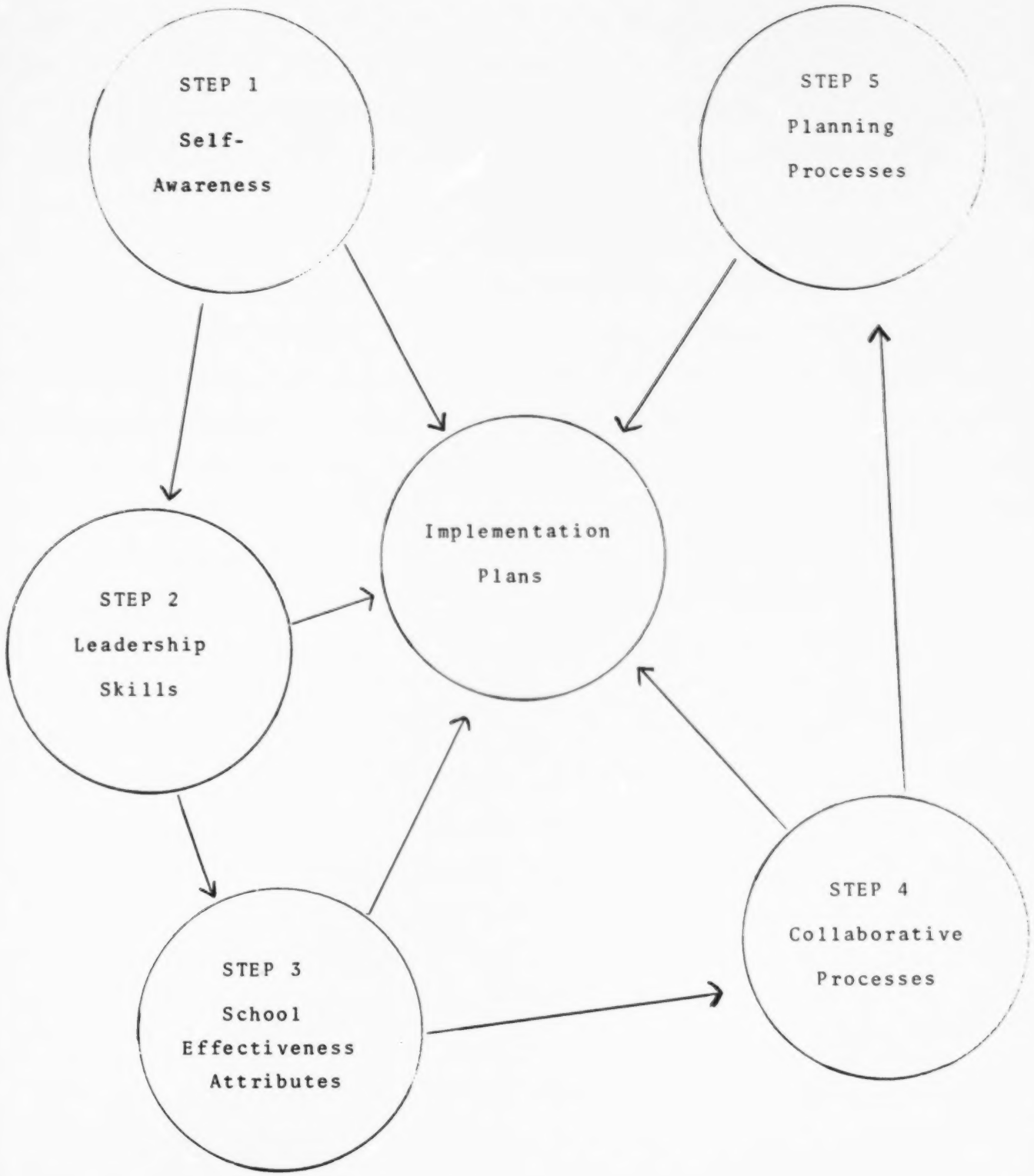

FIGURE 1 - A Developmental Model for Leadership Improvement

staff informed of the in-service they were undergoing. It was hoped that staff interest and support would grow as a result of these interventions.

The fourth stage focussed on collaborative group processes. The emphasis here was on participative decision-making, team building, reward systems, and analyzing and developing new norms where necessary.

Stage five dealt with planning processes. Principals were shown how to conduct a needs assessment for their school. They were also familiarized with planning techniques such as concerns analysis, nominal group technique (NGT), Phield, Delphi, brainstorming, Irish Parliament, barnacle sessions, hot seat sessions, quality circles and surveys. Instruction was also provided in developing a school profile. It was felt that the development of a school profile would facilitate the school's attempt to develop a strategic plan.

Finally, principals had to develop a vision for their school. The vision was to be translated into a "Mission Statement" for each school. We should say that this aspect of the program was most difficult for many of the principals. We think, in part, the reasons are that most principals have not had to engage in such work previously. Yet, our feeling was that if the principals were to be the leaders in their school, they had to: (1) focus their own attention and that of others on a vision; (2) communicate through symbol, rhetoric, and action the meanings embedded in their vision; (3) position themselves strategically to maximize their own organization's strengths to embody and communicate the vision; and (4) embody in their own person the quest for the vision through their competence and persistence. Bennis and Nanus (1985) in their research found that exceptional leaders exhibited these attributes.

The final stage focussed on implementation. Principals were

encouraged to develop yearly and longer term plans. In particular, emphasis was placed on developing action plans and the usage of action teams. The need for a school profile was again emphasized. Time was devoted to evaluating and monitoring of school improvement plans. Particular emphasis was placed on quasi-experimental research designs. Whether such efforts will succeed, is too soon to say.

Consideration was given to formal and informal techniques. Principals were encouraged to utilize informal techniques in the early stages of the process, and to shift to formal strategies during the later stages. The need to use the quasi-experimental design was stressed. We felt it was important that principals and teachers experience success early in the process, if further change was to be forthcoming.

As indicated in the introduction to this section the first year was devoted to leadership training. The second year is devoted to working with the teachers in the schools. The emphasis will be on conducting needs assessment, developing and implementing action plans, and changing the cultural linkages in the schools. To date an orientation session has been provided for the teachers and their support has been sought. Some initial needs assessment have been conducted and minimal plans developed. It is too soon to report the success or lack of success of this approach. It is fair to report that support of the principals is encouraging. The initial apprehensions and reluctance of a number of principals has dissipated. All Administrators are fully supportive of the approach and their reports indicate a greater comfort and willingness to proceed with the project. Many have undertaken small initiatives at this early stage. Our assessments indicate that the principals have a better awareness of the gaps that exist between their perceptions and that of the stakeholders.

For example, early in the process we had the principals complete the Kilmann-Saxton Culture Gap Survey. Of the group, one-third reported that no culture gaps existed in their school. As a result of the work on better understanding the culture in their school, these same principals now admit that some gap does exist. They are also much more receptive to examining and understanding the workings of their school.

School Improvement Through Cultural Linkages

In the second project, our basic intention was improvement of the principalship. Or, as stated by Bennis and Nanus (1985), "improving others to translate intention into reality and sustain it" (p. 80). This approach has been judged important also because of the centrality of the principals' role in building and sustaining culture.

There are at least two traditions to culture vis-a-vis organizations: the functionalist approach and the interpretive approach. The functionalist considers culture to be an organizational variable whereas the interpretivist sees culture as a pattern of symbolic discourse. Whatever the approach, most organizational writers (e.g., Deal and Kennedy, 1983; Schein, 1985; Firestone & Wilson, 1985) see culture as how the work of the organization gets done. Consequently, culture is socially constructed, symbolically maintained and transmitted, and therefore susceptable to change. Trew (1987) argues that its management is therefore feasible.

Culture Creation, Maintenance and Transmission[1]

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[1]The assistance of Freda Trew is greatly acknowledged in this section.

Culture is socially constructed. As such, Dyer (1985) contends culture is created from three sources:

(1) Founders and leaders bring with them assumptions, values, artifacts and perceptions which they impress on their employees.

(2) Culture emerges as members of the organization interact with one another in solving the problems of the work place.

(3) Individual members may become "culture creators" as they solve problems and these are passed on to succeeding generations of employees (p. 210).

Schein (1985) suggests that the shared elements of culture are derived through a learning process based on experience, problem-solving, anxiety-avoidance and validation. On this basis, "something can become part of the culture only if it works" (p. 18).

Schein (1985) focuses on the role of leadership and the formal aspects of the organization as the basis of maintenance and transmission. He contends that the mechanisms for reinforcing culture are:

(1) What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control; (2) leader reactions to critical incidents and organizational crises; (3) deliberate role modelling, teaching and coaching by leaders; (4) criteria for allocation of rewards and status; (5) criteria for recruitment, selection, promotion, retirement, and excommunication (pp. 224-225).

Changing the School's Culture

The ability to change any culture is determined in large part by the magnitude of the change and the strength of the prevailing culture. Schein (1985) sees change as a result of planning, organizational development, and incrementalism. Coercive persuasion and turnabout methods are also part of his model.

Sathe's (1983) model, on the other hand, has five intervention points

all of which must be utilized. These include: changing the existing behavior; justifying the new behavior; communicating the new beliefs and values; hiring and socializing members to fit the new culture; and removing the deviates.

Firestone and Wilson (1985) contend that in schools the principal is the main agent for the culture change. The reasons are:

(1) The principal can manage the flow of stories and other information in the school.

(2) The principal can create and manipulate symbols and rituals.

(3) The principal can be an active communicator of culture as he/she wonders about the school.

(4) The principal can be both a role model and coach in the school.

Teaching generally tends to be a lonely job. Teachers are by and large protected from the environment and their main source of satisfaction is derived from their interaction with students. Recent research (e.g., Firestone & Wilson, 1985; Willower & Smith, 1986), however, shows that principals can have a tremendous impact on teachers, and thus, the culture of the school. In a similar fashion, central administrators can have a significant impact on the work of principals and their expectations for the school. Administrators are key instigators of ceremonies, meetings, community functions and other events which help form the cultural linkages. These cultural linkages are the mechanisms by which the work of the school gets done. And it is through the cultural linkages that school improvement may best take place.

School Improvement Propositions

Based on our work, in rural jurisdictions, we offer the following

propositions for the consideration of those interested in school improvement. In the initial stages, external consultants may be a necessary prerequisite in non-urban school divisions because such jurisdictions lack the infra-structure of support available in their counterparts. However, as soon as possible, the locus of direction and control should shift to the local level, to those ultimately responsible for instituting and sustaining improvements.

1. Organization renewal is more likely to occur where the cultural norms are conducive to change.
2. The principal must be the main agent for culture change in the school.
3. School principals who have a shared vision are more likely to improve their schools.
4. School improvement effort that is incorporated into the daily norms of the school will be more pervasive and durable than those that are not.
5. Improvement plans that utilize collaborative planning and group decision making processes will be more successful than those that do not.
6. School improvement approaches that are developmental in nature will be more successful than those that are bureaucratic or self-directed.
7. School improvement efforts that are incremental in nature will be more pervasive and durable than those efforts that focus on all attributes of effectiveness.
8. Central office administrators and principals need to provide the incentives and act as a role model if improvement efforts are to be successful.
9. Board support in terms of planning and in-service time, are critical factors in the success of any school improvement plan.

10. Principal leadership training is a prior condition to school improvement.

Conclusion

In earlier sections, we outlined two approaches to school improvement. It is our contention that viewing schools as dynamic social systems with cultural characteristics may provide a better framework for improving schools. The school culture model "assumes that changing schools requires changing people's behavior and attitudes, as well as the accepted norms. It assumes that consensus among staff is more powerful than overt control, without ignoring the need for leadership" (Purkey & Smith, 1983, p. 441). The cultural norms become the linkages through which control is exercised upon the individual. Effecting successful change efforts becomes a process of negotiating these control linkages.

One might ask why the interest in cultural linkages? In part the answer is that various researchers conclude that successful schools seem to have a functional culture that is aligned with excellence. Owens (1987), for example, is synthesizing the school effectiveness literature suggests that "organizational culture is a critical factor in student behavior and achievement" (p. 196). Deal (1985) also concludes that performance in schools is linked with culture. Firestone and Wilson (1985) in a recent article claim that "cultural linkages work directly on people's consciousness to influence how they think about what they do" (p. 13). Then linkages, in turn, affect the teacher's commitment to the task, and ultimately his/her productivity.

In conclusion, it is our contention that the cultural developmental approach will result in successful school improvement efforts. However, only the future will bear the fruits of such endeavors.

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